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SPECIAL ISSUE,

WOMEN OF THE YEAR


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Gloria Molina

FOR *effective leadership in the 1984 voter registration drive, and for her pioneering example as the first Hispanic woman in the California legislature.*

For California Assemblywoman Gloria Molina, the words "voter registration" have bite and meaning far beyond a definition in a dry civics textbook. Molina sees political answers to most community questions and she tells Hispanics, especially women, that they will never get their issues considered until they increase their political power. "The only thing politicians ever respond to is either money or votes," she says. "I don't think our community is ever going to have a large amount of money to influence any issue. But we do have the potential to affect votes."

Working with the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project and the Woman to Woman Campaign '84, Molina put numbers behind her words in 1984 by helping register 42,000 new voters in the heavily Latino area of East Los Angeles, 80 percent of them Democrats and more than half women. Her role in that drive and in heading up the women's effort for the Mondale-Ferraro ticket in California marks Molina, the first Latina in the California legislature, as one of the brightest new stars on the feminist political horizon.

Molina not only mobilizes women in her community, but she and a handful of bright young men are also altering the Democratic Party's view of Latinos. For one thing, they are urban. Gone are the days when Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers were the only Chicano movement. Still a charismatic leader, Chavez remains influential on farm labor questions, but when he ventures into urban areas, as he did in opposing Molina's election in 1982 because of a political quarrel with one of her allies, he may well lose. (Chavez and Molina now work together on issues.) Latinos, like blacks, have diverse new leadership that they insist on designating themselves rather than having it imposed by outsiders.

Carmen Delgado Votaw of the National Conference of Puerto Rican Women points to yet another role for Molina. "Seeing someone like Gloria get elected is a big spur to others. At thirty-six, she's young, vibrant, a hard worker. Many Hispanic women have come onto the scene mature, but Gloria's youth is a harbinger of good things."

Molina's move into politics was anything but obvious as she was growing up, the eldest of 10 children of Leonardo and Concepción Molina. Her father, born in Los Angeles but raised in Mexico, returned under a *bracero* program and settled permanently in the United States in 1947. When Gloria was little, she had dreams of a "glamorous" life. Indeed, she started Rio Hondo Community College with a major in fashion design, but soon had to go to work full-time as a legal secretary when her father was hurt in an industrial accident. She turned into an activist while working with girl gangs and confronting the school system's massive indifference.

Along with helping organize Comisión Femenil in Los Angeles to work for better child care and job training for Hispanic women, Molina's first political success came in efforts in 1972 to get then-governor Ronald Reagan to put a Hispanic woman on the California Commission on the Status of Women. Reagan "sort of patted us on the head," Molina explains, but he did name a Hispanic woman to the commission. "It was such a high for me. Not that it was any major huge big thing, but we had done something."

Molina worked on the assembly campaign of another rising Latino, Art Torres, and was hired as his administrative assistant when he was elected in 1974. After a stint in the Carter White House personnel office, she learned that Torres was running in 1982 for the state senate. She decided to run for his assembly seat. She had paid her political dues, but she found that when she went to pick up her membership card in the legislative club, it was marked "men only." Assemblyman Richard Alatorre, a supporter in past efforts, and others

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By Kay Mills

A.B.M.: Time and again you have referred to the fact that you don't have a degree. It's caused some interesting phenomena in your career—like the fact that you can't belong to the American College of Hospital Administrators and your staff people can. But really, at this point in your career, so what?

R.R.: I don't care about it in that sense any more. I don't have to prove myself. I would want it for me as a tool to do something else.

A.B.M.: Have you ever really considered returning to school? You still can.

R.R.: I've thought about it and I just wouldn't do it. I'm not disciplined enough. I'm perfectly happy to go home and curl up like an embryo and watch TV or read. Really, I put in ten and twelve hours a day, five and six days a week. I've earned the right.

Ann Brehm-Moline is a former managing editor of "Today's Chicago Woman" and is currently a publications editor at AT&T.

Molina

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backed her opponent, a Hispanic man.

"That was probably one of the biggest heartbreaks I have had," Molina explains, "because it really destroyed the idea that if I worked hard, became a team player, learned the process well enough, became informed enough, they'd let me play ball with them."

Eventually, Art Torres bucked the pressure and backed her, which Molina says took great strength. Molina won the assembly seat. And women were crucial in her victory. Women contributed or raised 75 percent of the $194,000 she spent. The first big money, the kind you need to start the phones, came from Assemblywoman Maxine Waters, a member of the Democratic leadership in Sacramento and Molina's counterpart as a galvanizing feminist force in the black community.

But going to Sacramento as a member of the assembly was rough, Art Torres recalled, "because Gloria went as a maverick." Waters agreed: "Gloria came committed to women and basic progressive issues and she has been absolutely true to those causes. But she has found some of the obstacles unbelievable."

Molina has nonetheless steered into law bills of special concern to her district, from outlawing discrimination against immigrants in auto insurance to requiring that people be notified if their neighborhoods are going to be sprayed for agricultural pests. Governor George Deukmejian vetoed bills she sponsored that would have required school districts to keep dropout statistics; that would have upgraded medical care and other services for pregnant teenagers; and that would have improved the low transfer rate between community colleges and four-year universities—all issues of special concern in East Los Angeles.

"I'm already keeping my little tally," Molina said of the conservative Republican governor's vetoes, "for when the governor runs again in 1986. We should not deliver to him the Hispanic vote if that's what he's going to do on our issues."

Molina's eyes were opened to the conservative nature of the California legislature when she took to a committee hearing a bill granting unemployment compensation to people who leave their jobs because of sexual harassment. "Sexual harassment is wrong, so I thought, 'No problem.' The men on that subcommittee didn't understand. They wanted me to define it. They were afraid I was creating some loophole that women would use to collect unemployment on a whim." She negotiated. The bill passed, and Deukmejian signed it.

Molina has had a string of nervy confrontations. She told Assembly Speaker Willie Brown he wasn't doing enough for women and asked when he was going to start. She told a Hollywood star at a Woman to Woman event to register voters instead of signing autographs. And she lit into a powerful male legislator who referred to two of her colleagues as "girls . . . fighting on the assembly floor," even though the man could have moved her to an office in a sixth-floor closet.

"Anytime you take a position, you run the risk of offending another legislator," Molina said. "You have to take risks." She concedes that perhaps she should learn to "cool off," but Maxine Waters, no shrinking violet herself, finds Molina's candor "an admirable quality. Good advocates don't say what everyone else says. That's why they're good advocates."

Molina is in a sense the designer she always wanted to be, drawing women into the political process, cloaking them with new power, and fashioning for herself a political career that can take her wherever she wants to go.

Kay Mills is an editorial writer for the Los Angeles "Times."

Brown

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his deeply conservative Southern family, refuses to put his days as a hero and firebrand behind him. He cannot accept the value of the not revolutionary but still solid changes that have taken place since the sixties. Nor can he accept Jessie's longing for some comfort and security. And to him, his niece and nephew are simply the children of the enemy. Those two children, in turn, are living in a different sort of aftermath. They are forced, with their parents' death, to depend upon people and to follow principles they have been taught to abhor. *Civil Wars* is probably most moving at the moments when O'Neill and Helen begin to understand "that things are not so simple."

"Fiction," says Rosellen Brown, "always has an obligation *to the other side,* whatever it is. Finding an adequate angle of vision is the hardest thing about writing it. It's frightening to imagine the inner life of an 'enemy.' But what is more worthwhile?"

None of Rosellen Brown's fiction is explicitly autobiographical, except, as she puts it, "it is always an autobiography of my thoughts." But *Civil Wars* grew out of her own experiences as an activist in Mississippi, where she and her husband spent three years during the sixties. During those years, she felt a "revulsion" toward the Mississippi whites that it now "mortifies" her to recall. *Civil Wars,* she says, was inspired partly by "a sense of duty to redress the balance, to do a more complex kind of justice. It was extremely difficult, and I was always afraid that I would trivialize history by reducing it to a domestic level. But there *are* no politics in the abstract. It does come down to the details of individual lives. And in the back of my mind I kept referring to something Chekhov said. It went something like, 'Look how you live, my friends. What a pity.' "

The justice that Rosellen Brown succeeds so finely in doing is less that of Western law, and more like the African ideal of justice, which is never absolute;

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